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Gender Differences and Political Deliberations on Social Media

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Social media has emerged as an arena for political deliberation. Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp are major platforms where political debates/deliberation take place. This study was undertaken to investigate if attitude and perception towards these online platforms for political deliberation differs for male and female. For this purpose, a quantitative study was conducted using a structured questionnaire among 400 students of a private university. The finding suggests that males are more likely to be involved on political deliberation on social media than their female counterparts. Also male students value social media as an arena for political deliberation more than their female students.

Keywords: Gender differences, political deliberation, social media

Research studies have suggested that “deliberative democracy” is one of the most dominant approaches to study the online political discourse (Hindman, 2008; Freelon, 2010). It emphasizes on rational and critical political discussion for an ideal form of democracy. For such rational and critical political discussion, Internet is, ideally, the most powerful tool for a thriving democratic country like India: It could be a force which can change old power structures by facilitating as a platform for critical and rational political deliberation. It could be a place for unbiased political discussion where the most logical argument would not only win in the end but also appreciated. However, this is an ideal situation which is far from reality. The participants, involved in political debates on social media, hardly follow the logical approach where rational and critical arguments are well presented in polite manner. It was expected that rise of information technology will ensure that citizens are not only well informed about the economic and political affairs but also cherish the power of logic and reason in their political deliberation. However, the reality is far from what was expected. Political discussion on social media is often characterized by impolite behavior (Hmielowski et al., 2014; Anderson et al., 2014), trivial fights, uninformed opinions and withdrawing from public discussion forums to “echo chambers” where existing views get reinforcement (Stroud, 2010; Colleoni et al., 2014).

Despite the rise of political discussion on social media, studies have shown that people are very conscious about the content they post, like or share online (Silfverberg et al., 2011; Uski, 2015). Research studies have also evidenced that some individuals avoid online political discussions because they don’t want to be seen as “too political” and/or are afraid that it will hurt their social image among their network (Rainie & Smith, 2012; Storsul, 2014; Gearhart & Weiwe, 2015). Further, literature on political participation and

gender have evidenced that men are more likely to be politically associated with a party (Coffe & Bolzendahl, 2010), devote more time to read, watch, and discuss politics (Verba et al., 1997). On the contrary, women are more likely to be involved in political consumerism, boycotting the purchase of certain products, than their counterparts (Stolle et al., 2005).

Thus, measuring and comparing attitudes of male and female towards the political discussion on social media becomes important for better understanding of political discourse on online social media platforms. Though there are difference amongst researchers about the relationship between attitude and behavior, however there is consensus that attitude has significant influence on behavior and vice versa (Holland et al., 2002; Wicker, 1969). If someone is not sure about the relevance and importance of political deliberation on social media, it is very likely that person will not participate on political deliberation on social media. That person would see the exercise futile and wastage of time and energy. Further, it has also to be noted that attitudes are often have some degree of ambiguity. Attitudes are rarely measured on dichotomous scale. For a large variety of aspects our attitudes cannot be simply measured on positive or negative side. Similarly, attitudes towards political deliberation on social media cannot be measured on dichotomous scale. The study uses Likert scale to measure the perception and attitude of males and females for political deliberation on social media.

Political deliberation on social media is emerging field of research with limited focus on possible gender differences. There is no consensus amongst researchers whether there are gender differences for online political participation. Research studies have reported mixed results in this field. Some research studies have evidenced gender differences in online political participation, while others reported no gender differences. For instance, Bakker and De Vreese (2011) evidences significant gender differences for visiting official websites of government and websites of politically parties. The same study also reports gender differences for offline political participation such as writing letters to political leaders, participating in political protests, approaching an elected official for seeking solutions or personal or social problems, and political deliberation.

Verba et al. (1995) opine that active political participation, be it voting for a political party, discussing and debating political issues and persuading others to vote/support for a political party or cause, is a way for an individual to contribute to the political system that influence her/him directly. However, political participation is not equal across different demographic variables (Tolbert & McNeal 2003; Oser et al., 2013). There especially appears to be a divergence between the participation of male and female (Verba et al., 1997; Coffe and Bolzendahl, 2010). Women are less likely than men to post political statuses and are less likely to share political orientation information on their Facebook profile (Miller et al., 2015).

In the light of the above discussion, the study attempts to examine the following research questions: Does attitude towards using online platforms for political deliberation differ for male and female students, and how is the online political discussion perceived by different gender.

Literature Review

There is no consensus on the definition of social media. It is very recent phenomenon and there are different web based and mobile based platforms acting as media i.e. peer to peer media, peer to peer network, social web pages etc. However, researchers agree on certain features of social media such as user generated content, operation through virtual communities and networks. Bechmann and Lomborg (2012) note that social media is:

“often associated with new digital media phenomena such as blogs, social network sites, location-based services, microblogs, photo- and videosharing sites, etc., in which ordinary users (i.e. not only media professionals) can communicate with each other and create and share content with others online through their personal networked computers and digital mobile devices”.

Bechmann and Lomborg (2012) also highlight three major characteristics of social media i.e. deinstitutionalized communication; user is an active producer of content; and communication is interactive. Further, there are many concepts that have been used interchangeably in the academic discussion such as the concept of net, Internet, cyberspace & online space (Dahlgren, 2009). This study considers social media as any online public space that serve as a platform for political deliberation. However, the main focus of the study is Facebook, Twitter, and Whatsapp, given their significantly large number of subscribers. Other platforms such as blogs, Instagram and online discussions forums are also taken into consideration for the study. Social media has emerged as the most favorite platform for political participation as it offers great opportunities for larger public to be involved in political discussion. So it is argued that online political deliberation should be studied separately from political participation though it has close association with offline political participation (Krueger 2002; Dimitrova et al., 2011). Oser et al. (2013) categorize political participants into three categories i.e. those who participate primarily online, those who participate primarily offline and those who are active both ways online and offline. Oser et al. (2013) also find that young people are more likely to participate online than offline.

Although, online and offline political participation is different, yet research suggests that during election time, higher online participation on social media correlates with higher offline participation (Dimitrova et al., 2014). This suggests that deliberation on social media is a meaningful contribution for political parties. Further, research studies also provide evidences in support of the argument that online political participation increases voting (Tolbert & McNeal, 2003; Teresi & Michelson, 2015).

However, how much funds should be devoted in online promotion in order to get significant returns in terms of offline participation is a matter of debate. The current concerns related with online political participation are associated with what political scientists see as “slacktivism”. Kristofferson et al. (2014) define slacktivism as “a willingness to perform a relatively costless, token display of support for a social cause, with an accompanying lack of willingness to devote significant effort to enact meaningful change.”

It has been shown that there are more female users of Facebook than male users (Pew, 2013), and female use Facebook for communication more than their male counterparts who use Internet more for information searches (Jackson et al., 2001). Considering the more women use social media for communication, it can be argued that social media can act as a platform for women to express their political opinion and participate in political deliberation. Further, apart from political participation, social media also provide opportunity to politically participate in other forms such as promoting certain cause and gathering support using www.change.org, signing online petitions and influencing policy measures as was evidenced in the case of opposing “Free Basics” offered by Facebook.

Ideally social media should provide a platform to all for voicing expressing their opinions freely. However, that is far from the truth. Today, social media is a place where conflict could lead to trolling and harassment (Biber et al., 2002; Lindsay & Krysik, 2012).

It appears that major political parties have their own dedicated online activists those who defend their political party very aggressively and tries to silence every dissent voice by harassing and using abusing languages as evidenced by case of Gurmehar Kaur. This further raises issues about the way personal or social interaction on social media could influence the way in which users, particularly female, participate politically on social media.

Methodology

As outlined in the introduction, the aim of this study is to investigate whether attitude towards using online platforms for political deliberation differs for male and female students and how is the online political discussion perceived by different gender. This study uses quantitative approach for testing following two hypotheses.

H₀₁: There is no significant difference in the attitude of male and female students towards political deliberation on social media

H₀₂: There is no significant difference in the perception of male and female students towards political deliberation on social media

Primary data was collected using a standard questionnaire which is administered to 400 students of undergraduate and postgraduate program using quota sampling method. There were 50 per cent male and 50 per cent female students and there were 50 per cent undergraduate and 50% postgraduate students in the selected sample.

Findings and Analysis

To carry out descriptive and inferential statistical analysis data were analyzed with the help of statistical software SPSS. Descriptive statistics were analyzed to test the basic assumptions of multivariate data analysis. Further, to test the mean differences between attitude and perception of the male and female students towards political deliberation on social media, data was analyzed on univariate and multivariate level. Item-wise comparisons were made using ANOVA and thereafter MANOVA was applied to test the significance of mean difference between attitude and perception of male and female students for political deliberation on social media.

Table 1, MANOVA - test of group differences on attitude towards political deliberation on social media

Variables	Female		Male		Univariate F test	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	F	Sig. P<
I find it important to participate in political discussion online	2.96	1.15	3.48	0.88	50.51	.000
I think that conversations on social media can have an actual impact on politics and current affairs in general.	2.63	1.07	3.19	0.75	77.88	.000
I enjoy good political debates online	2.08	1.20	3.49	1.18	352.44	.000
I am annoyed by people who always want to discuss politics online	2.67	0.68	3.24	0.71	126.25	.000

Multivariate test of significance

Pillai's Trace	0.338	Exact F = 105.645 with 4 df P < .001
Wilks' Lambda	0.666	
Hotelling's Trace	0.532	

Table 2. MANOVA- test of group differences on perception towards political deliberation on social media

Variables	Female		Male		Univariate F test	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	F	Sig. P<
I think social media is a good place to discuss politics	2.83	1.14	3.37	0.94	52.97	.000
On social media citizens have equal possibilities to take part in political discussion	2.58	1.23	3.09	0.95	42.93	.000
On social media, everyone's opinion is equally valued	2.55	1.08	3.07	0.99	45.65	.000
It is easy to follow politics through social media.	2.25	1.04	2.99	1.23	85.98	.000

Multivariate test of significance

Pillai's Trace	0.134	Exact F = 30.92 with 4 df P < .001
Wilks' Lambda	0.866	
Hotelling's Trace	0.152	

Table 1 shows the results for group difference on “Attitude towards Political deliberation on social media”. Multivariate tests were found significant. Therefore the first null hypothesis that “There is no significant difference in the attitude of male and female students towards political deliberation on social media” is rejected. The univariate *F*- statistics were also found significant ($\alpha = 0.95$) for all items.

Table 2 shows the results for group difference on “Perception towards Political deliberation on social media”. Here too, multivariate tests were found significant; hence second null hypothesis that “There is no significant difference in the perception of male and female students towards political deliberation on social media” is also rejected. The univariate *F*-statistics were found significant ($\alpha = 0.95$) here also for all items.

The above findings indicate that there exist significant difference as regards to perception and attitude of male and female students towards political deliberation on social media. The findings are in support the earlier findings regarding divergence in political participation of male and female (Verba et al., 1997; Coffe & Bolzendahl, 2010; Miller et al., 2015).

Conclusion

This study was an attempt to investigate the attitude and perception of young male and female students towards political deliberation on social media. The study finds that male students are more likely to use social media for political deliberation and they value social media as an arena for political deliberation more than their female counterparts. Social media was expected to act as a platform which could level the playing field for

female's political participation; however findings of this study don't conform to the said purpose. These negative attitudes and perception of female students could be possibly explained by past research findings that caution about uncivilized behavior on social media (Papacharissi, 2004).

Every research study has certain limitations. Apart from the general limitations of quantitative approach using survey method, this study has two major limitations. First, the sample is skewed for education and income in comparison to the general population of India. All participants are students of graduate and postgraduate program of a private university. Second, the sample has not been selected randomly and thus findings could not be generalized to all undergraduate and post graduate students. Future research should focus on exploring the relationship between gender and online political participation in the presence of online conflicts on social media. The research instrument in this study attempts to lay the groundwork and it has great scope for further improvement.

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